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LETTERS OF SAMUEL F. B. MORSE—1812

BY EDWARD L. MORSE

II

THE impassioned appeal of young Morse to his parents and family had no effect whatever. On the contrary, they ridiculed him for indulging in such heroics; they maintained that they were in a much better position to judge of the rights and the wrongs of the matter, and they again insisted on his leaving politics out of his letters. His sympathies were, however, so strongly enlisted on behalf of his beloved country that he could not resist the temptation again and again to give a free rein to his political feelings, while at the same time filling many pages with details of his artistic advancement and of the many wonderful sights which the London of those stirring days afforded.

He returned to the attack in a letter of January 1, 1813:

“Last Thursday week I received a very polite invitation from Henry Thornton, Esq., to dine with him, which I accepted. I had no introduction to him, but, hearing that your son was in the country, he found me out, and has shown me every attention. He is a very pleasant, sensible man, but his character is too well known to you to need any eulogium from me.

“At his table was a son of Mr. Stephen, the author of the odious Orders in Council. Mr. Thornton asked me at table if I thought that, if the Orders in Council had been repealed a month or two sooner, it would not have prevented the war. I told him I thought it would, at which he was much pleased, and turning to Mr. Stephen he said: ‘Do you hear that, Mr. Stephen? I always told you so.’

“Last Wednesday I dined at Mr. Wilberforce’s. I was extremely pleased with him. At his house I met Mr. Thornton and Mr. Grant, members of Parliament. In the course of conversation they introduced America, and Mr. Wilber-

force regretted the war extremely; he said it was like two of the same family quarreling, that he thought it a judgment on this country for their wickedness, and that they had been justly punished for their arrogance and insolence at sea, as well as the Americans for their vaunting on land.

“As Mr. Thornton was going he invited me to spend a day or two at his seat at Clapham, a few miles out of town. I accordingly went and was very civilly treated. The reserve, which I mentioned in a former letter, was evident, however, here, and I felt a degree of embarrassment arising from it which I never felt in America. The second day I was a little more at my ease. . . .

“In the course of the day I asked Mr. Thornton what were the objects that the English Government had in view when they laid the Orders in Council. He told me in direct terms, ‘*The universal monopoly of commerce*’; that they had long desired an excuse for such measures as the Orders in Council; and that the French decrees were exactly what they wished, and the opportunity was seized with avidity the moment it was offered. They knew that the Orders in Council bore hard upon the Americans, but that they considered that as merely ‘*incidental*.’

“To this I replied, if such was the case as he represented it, what blame could be attached to the American Government for declaring war. He said that it was urged that America ought to have considered the circumstances of the case, and that Great Britain was fighting for the liberties of the world; that America was in a great degree interested in the decision of the contest, and that she ought to be content to suffer a little.

“I told him that England had no right whatsoever to infringe on the *neutrality* of America, or to expect because she, England, supposed herself to have justice on her side in the contest with France, that of course the Americans should think the same. The moment America declared this opinion her neutrality ceased. ‘Besides,’ said I, ‘how can they have the face to make such a declaration when you just now said that their object was universal monopoly and they longed for an excuse to adopt measures to that end?’ I told him that it showed that all the noise about England’s fighting for the liberties of mankind proved to be but a thirst, a selfish desire for universal monopoly.

“This, he said, seemed to be the case; he could not deny

it. He was going on to observe something respecting the French decrees when we were interrupted, and I have not been able again to resume the conversation. . . .

“ You say in your last letters, ‘ Were you here, you would be as warm a Federalist as you ever were.’ Had I never visited England I probably should, for then I should never have known, perhaps, the truths which I now know. . . .

“ When I hear such principles avowed by this government as I have mentioned; when such a contemptuous disregard of American rights is manifested in their measures; when, after our declaration of war, they neglect to answer it for six or seven months, and then in so unsatisfactory a manner as to give general disgust; and when I find no one, in short, attempting a justification of themselves, what must I think, what must any man think, in such a case? Would you have me, in the face of all this, retain my Federal feelings and justify them through everything when they cannot and dare not do it themselves?

“ To sum up my sentiments, then, in a few words: I believe that, in declaring war, America has acted justly; that had she done otherwise she would have been justly entitled to the epithets so liberally (*before the war*) bestowed upon her of *cowardly*, *imbecile*, and the like; that the American administration was imprudent, to say the least, in not having prepared before for such an event. I think that the American character has risen beyond the bounds of the most exaggerated expectation since the declaration of war. We are raised from ‘ mere descendants of convicts ’ to a level with a nation who pride themselves as the first in the world, and by whom? Not only by all the powers on the Continent (I have seen extracts from Italian, Dutch, and Swedish papers which speak in raptures of the rising greatness of America on account of her naval successes), but by England herself. As proof of this I could quote passages from every paper in the country. It would certainly amuse you to see the difference in the tone of the public prints from what they were before the war. They were filled with abuse of America, and I have quoted in my other letter instances. How do they speak of her now, with sneers and contemptuous insinuations? No; with the greatest respect; they now for the first time claim relationship with us and speak of us as deserving an equal standing with themselves.

“ But I must abruptly close, as I am to send this directly.

You will have heard before this arrives of the glorious news from Russia. Bonaparte is for once *defeated* and will probably never again recover from it."

Here the son and his parents could meet on a common ground, for they were in perfect harmony in hoping for the success of England and her allies in the campaign against Napoleon Bonaparte on the Continent.

Morse must have tried to obey his parents' injunction to leave politics alone, at least to the extent of not writing about them, for there is no mention of them in his letters of that period until some months afterward, when the temptation seems to have been too great to resist. However, in a letter to a friend of May 30, 1813, he refers to the subject in the following language:

"Your good sister, Mrs. Jarvis, in her letter mentions the marriage of your sister Ann to Captain Hull of the navy. True, it is 'none but the brave deserve the fair.' Captain Hull is a man I had often heard of before the war, and I esteemed him and respected him for the gentlemanly character which he always bore; but since the war I almost adore him and have often been on the point of sitting down to express my feelings of admiration to him in a letter, though wholly unacquainted with him personally. To me in particular he has been the object of triumph to many an insolent Englishman who before the war took pleasure in wounding my feelings by reflections upon the paltry navy of my country. It is now my turn to triumph, and, though I regret this unhappy war, yet I shall ever reflect with pride upon the occasion which has brought before the world a Hull, a Decatur, a Jones, a Bainbridge, and a Lawrence.

"Hull was the first who struck the flag of English invincibility and nailed it to the American mast; to Hull, then, are due the first honors America can bestow."

We find, from a letter of July 10, 1813, to his parents, that his feelings got the better of his discretion:

"I have just heard of the unfortunate capture of the *Chesapeake*. Is our infant Hercules to be strangled at its birth? Where is the spirit of former times which kindled in the hearts of the Bostonians? Will they still be unmoved, or must they learn from more bitter experience that Britain is not for peace and that the only way to secure it is to join heart and hand in a vigorous prosecution of the war? It is not time now to think of party; the country is in danger,

but I hope to hear soon that the honor of our navy is retrieved. The brave Captain Lawrence will never, I am sure, be forgotten. His career of glory has been short but brilliant.

“All is rejoicing here, illuminations and fireworks and *feux de joie*, for the capture of the *Chesapeake* and a victory in Spain. Imagine yourself, if possible, in my situation in an enemy's country and hearing songs of triumph and exultation on the misfortunes of my countrymen; and this, too, on the Fourth of July. A less ardent spirit than mine might perhaps tolerate it, but I cannot. I do long to be at home, to be in the navy and teach these insolent Englishmen how to respect us. I never was treated with such rudeness and such insolence as since this unfortunate affair. They are the first to accuse the Americans of vain boasting, and are the loudest and most unreasonable in practising it themselves. . . .

“The Marquis Wellington has achieved a great victory in Spain and bids fair to drive the French out very soon. At this I rejoice, as ought every man who abhors tyranny and loves liberty. I wish the British success against everything but *my country*. I often say with Cowper, ‘England, with all thy faults I love thee still.’ But England has faults and great ones, too, which I cannot gloss over. I am ready to allow her all she deserves, but never for a few virtues will I cease to censure her many vices.

“*August 10th, 1813.*—I begin to be ashamed of my native State and of the Federal party. Mr. Quincy's resolutions have excited the abhorrence which is their due from every American here. One sentiment pervades the whole: they all think it a very impolitic and unjust measure, especially at this time. Let me ask, is it the fault of our gallant naval heroes that this war is declared? If it were, it would alter the case; but after they have done so much and have raised the American name to a higher standing than ever it was before; when they have done their duty, no matter whether in a just or unjust cause (they are not the persons to decide), does it become the Massachusetts legislature to pass such resolutions? It is not the way to make naval officers.

“Massachusetts boasts how much she has always been in favor of a navy, and the first time that navy distinguishes itself they not only do not praise the officers of that navy for making it the wonder of the world, but actually disap-

prove of their conduct by silence. The Democrats have always opposed a navy, and the Federalists of Massachusetts have now given the finishing blow to it. This is not the way they make naval officers in England.

“*August 26th, 1813.*—Papa says in his letter, among other things, ‘The honor of our country ought in no degree to suffer by those disgraceful defeats in Canada.’ People here do not take the trouble to inquire whether it is the strongest and most efficient part of the Union that is defeated or not. They know nothing of the Federal or Democratic parties; they think of the Americans; they defeat the Americans in Canada, and the whole American people suffer in consequence.

“Mama has amused me very much in her letters where she writes on politics. She says, next to changing one’s religion, she would dislike a man for changing his politics. Mama is, perhaps, not aware that she in this way would shut the door completely to conviction in anything. It would imply that, because a man is educated in error, he must forever live in error. I know exactly how Mama feels; she thinks, as I did when at home, that it was impossible for the Federalists to be in the wrong; but, as all men are fallible, I think they may stand a chance of being wrong as well as any other class of people.

“I do not, in saying this, wish to be thought a Democrat; I execrate their character as much as ever I did; their policy will be the ruin of our country; I think them weak. All this as a party, still I think the majority of the Democrats, as well as Federalists, mean well; they think neither of French nor English influence; they are Americans. But I never can believe that one party can do nothing bad and the other nothing good. The measures of the embargo, non-intercourse, and war I consider as just measures against this country, for reasons which I have before stated.

“Mama thinks my *error* arises from wrong information. I will ask Mama which of us is the most likely to get at the truth, I, who am in England and can see and hear all their motives for acting as they have done; or Mama, who gets her information from the Federal papers, second hand, with numerous additions and improvements made to answer party purposes, distorted and misrepresented?

“But to give you an instance: in the Massachusetts re-

monstrance they attribute the repeal of the Orders in Council to the kind disposition of the English Government and a wish on their part to do justice, whereas it is notorious in this country that they repealed them on account of the injury it was doing themselves, and they took America into consideration about as much as they did the inhabitants of Kamchatka. The conditional repeal of the Berlin and Milan decrees was a back door for them, and they availed themselves of it to sneak out at it. This necessity, this act of dire necessity, the Federal papers cry up as evincing a most forbearing spirit toward us and really astonish the English themselves, who never dreamt that it could be twisted in that way."

Writing on March 1, 1814, he says:

"I find you have completely mistaken my opinions of politics. Because I have completely divested myself of party, therefore I must be a Democrat. This, I think, is very unfair that I cannot differ at all from Federalists, but with one jump you set me down on the other side. . . .

"At present I see no reason to change my opinion. I am not Federalist enough to wish for the disgrace of my country, nor Democrat enough to wish the destruction of England, but I am just American enough to wish for a speedy and honorable restoration of peace between us and Great Britain. Thus endeth politics."

He was, no doubt, sincere in resolving to obey his parents and not mention politics again in his letters; but in this very same letter, although evidently at a later date, he returns again to the charge, stung by some remarks in letters from his brothers:

"If I am prohibited from writing or thinking of politics, I hope my brothers will not be so ungenerous as to give me any. Everything is interesting from home which is of a pleasant nature, but they certainly cannot suppose that a black catalogue of all the disgraces which we have suffered since the commencement of the war, with numerous alterations and additions, being a third or fourth edition of the continual changes which are rung in my ears from morning till night by the English newspapers, can be very pleasant to me. It is hard enough that they are true, harder to hear them from English mouths, and what must it be, after the cry has a little subsided here, to receive a budget of letters blazoning forth the same disgraces in the most glow-

ing colors and telling me for my consolation that my country is fast going to ruin? No accounts of some gallant exploit of a Perry or a Burroughs, a mere general outline of which is given here, leaving the particulars to come as they may. . . .

“I am well aware that my sentiments must appear strange to you all, but if it is any satisfaction to you (and I have no doubt it will be) you must know that I act and speak completely from the heart. I have not disguised in the slightest degree; my conscience bears me out in everything. I find that I am three and twenty years old; that I am neither blind nor deaf, can hear and, I hope, understand; that I have some judgment in many things; that I can trace the causes of that judgment to their sources; and I also have found that I am in England, wide awake, and that it is no dream. Now, having found all this, I begin to exercise my judgment (which at twenty-three years of age ought to have acquired a little strength), and I see and hear things every day, and decide accordingly. And yet my brothers tell me they have all the means of knowing, and I none; they are right, and I am wrong. When I see a thing I must believe it; when I hear a sentiment I must believe I heard it. Past twelve. Good night.

“*March 14th, 7 o'clock.*—Good morning. I am up early this morning to get a little time to write you. I left off up to my ears in politics, or rather defending my opinions. One more observation and I have done. You must all see that party spirit rages to a great height in America, in no country so much; that you are surrounded, as it were, with an atmosphere of misrepresentation. If a victory is gained, the first inquiry is, Is he a Federalist? Is he a Democrat? and, according as that question is decided, is he praised or abused. Is not this the case, and is it right? One paper comes out against another with the epithets of ‘British hireling,’ ‘British partisan,’ and asserts point-blank that he can prove it. What does the other; pass it over in silence? No, asserts that the other is a ‘French hireling,’ ‘French partisan,’ and he can prove it? Do either of them prove it? No; it is written in the morning and forgotten before evening.

“There is, I am ashamed to say, too much of this child’s quarreling in America. In a time like the present, when we are engaged in war with a foreign power, to be dividing

and quarreling among ourselves, giving our enemy cause to triumph, to talk of a division of the Union (the darling theme of the English here), when now is the time that we should be most united, when we ought to rouse and by vigorous measures to stop the war (which alone will do it), to be weakening by opposition the measures that are adopted is a course of proceeding which reflects disgrace on my countrymen.

“You will ask me, ‘Pray, if we think the war in which we are engaged an unjust one, should we not do all in our power to oppose it?’ If every man is at liberty to oppose every measure of government because it does not coincide with his sentiments, what order is to be expected in any country? I think it inseparable from our form of government, however, for if one party is in power the other makes it a point to oppose every measure of its antagonist. If the Federalists were in power, and should declare war against France, what an outcry would be raised against them by the Democrats!

“But where am I going? I do verily think I am going neck and heels into politics again, but I should not have said this much had it not been forced from me by my brothers’ letters. *The political part of this letter is addressed to them exclusively.* They are engaged in politics and they ought to read it. Were I a rich man, and they had the disposition, they should spend two or three months in England.

“But I will heave the political anchor and let go all. Mum!”

This letter gives a very clear insight into the character of the man who afterward achieved so much for the good of mankind, for the glory of his country, and for his own renown. He was ever actuated by the loftiest motives; he abhorred pettiness and deceit; his opinions were formed after a careful consideration of the arguments on both sides, but when once convinced of the righteousness of the cause he espoused he expressed himself in no uncertain terms, forcefully yet courteously. In this instance he honestly disagreed with his family at home, but it had no effect whatever on his affection for them or on theirs for him, for they remained a remarkably united family until one by one his parents and his brothers were called away by death and he was left the last survivor.

He tried hard to refrain from saying anything more about politics in his letters home at that time, and they are filled with most interesting matter of a different character, but every now and then he half unconsciously strays into the forbidden country. Later on in the letter last quoted from he again returns to the subject:

“I wish you to remember particularly that, although, through want of time to rewrite this, I have confounded the political part of this letter with the rest, I intend the politics for my brothers, and they shall be the last opinions I will write to any of you; for upon rereading them I see the inutility of telling you them, for it is impossible that you should see what I do, therefore you cannot weigh matters properly. I may be wrong, or you may be wrong; but, as different circumstances operate to form different opinions in each of us, we had better not waste our time and destroy our mutual pleasure in receiving letters by discussing so endless a topic as politics, and I agree to drop them altogether.”

He held to this resolution quite well for several months, but in a letter of September 9, 1814, he writes:

“As to my health, I never was better; my only anxiety is the welfare of my country, and I assure you I think much of her. I cannot but feel for her when I see such unity in a whole nation for the purpose of *subjugation* and *revenge*, such expectations of a division of our Union, and, on the other side, such encouragement given to these expectations. Posterity will curse the man who first proposes such a measure. I will give no opinion; I see much wrong, and I must feel. My country disgraced or honored is too important an alternative for me to be indifferent to it.”

Again on September 23d, after referring to the exploits of the *Wasp* and other American vessels and to certain engagements on land, he says:

“We have also heard of the capture of the *Essex*. Was not that a gallant thing? Porter, I suppose, is to have a ship of the line. He ought to have one; he is a brave fellow. Where is Cousin Breese. Don’t he burn to engage a British ship? I should in his situation. I hope he will, and do honor to his country and family.

“There was a report last night that Baltimore was in possession of the British. I don’t know what credit is to be attached to it. I hope party spirit will not, as it has

done, continue to destroy patriotism. He must be a traitor who can feel pleasure in the destruction of any town because it will serve to increase the odium of the party in power. I will think more charitably of my countrymen, and hope, when their shores are invaded, that opposition to government will be swallowed up in a determination to drive from their shores the invaders of their soil."

On October 11, 1814, he makes this last appeal to his father and family:

"I improve an excellent opportunity of writing you by Dr. Romeyn. . . . I shall be ruined in my feelings if I stay longer in England. I cannot endure the continued and daily insults to my feelings as an American. But on this head I promised not to write anything more; still allow me to say but a few words. On second thoughts, however, I will refer you entirely to Dr. Romeyn. If it is possible, as you value my comfort, see him as speedily as possible. He will give you my sentiments exactly, and I fully trust that, after you have heard him converse for a short time, you will completely liberate me from the imputation of error. One sentiment pervades the Americans here; and if one sentiment but pervaded you all at home, Americans would not be the constant theme of insult and abuse.

"I send you some newspapers which have come in my way by accident. I have not picked out the most abusive; they speak the language of all. If ever a nation was completely newspaper led, it is England. They all depend implicitly on what the newspaper says; and when the fountain is corrupt, what can you expect from those who drink of it? But for further particulars see *Dr. Romeyn*. . . .

"For a moment place yourself in my situation, and you will forgive the ardency of my feelings. While I am writing bells are ringing for victory and hand-bills crying about announcing the capture of Cartels, Machias, Buckston, etc., etc. Where is American patriotism! How long shall England, already too proud, glory in the blood of my countrymen! Oh, for the genius of Washington! Had I but his talents, with what alacrity would I return to the relief of that country which (without affectation, my dear parents) is dearer to me than my life. Willingly (I speak with truth and deliberation)—willingly would I sacrifice my life for her honor. Do not think ill of me for speaking thus strongly; you cannot judge impartially of my feelings until you

are placed in my situation. Do not say I suffer myself to be carried away by my feelings; your feelings could never have been tried as mine have; you cannot see with the eyes I do; you cannot have the means of ascertaining *facts* on this side of the water that I have.

“But I will leave this subject and only say *see Dr. Romeyn.*”

It is gratifying to learn that the elder Morse in America, after reading this impassioned appeal from his son and after hearing the reports of Americans who had returned from England, began to see the light, although still enjoining caution on the young man. The following extract is from a letter of the father to the son dated January 25, 1815:

“We have had letters from Dr. Romeyn and Mr. Van Schaick concerning you which have comforted us much. Since receiving them we don’t know but we have expressed ourselves in our letters in answer to your last a little stronger than we ought in regard to your political feelings and conduct. I find others who have returned feel pretty much as you do. But it should be remembered that your situation as an artist is different from theirs. It is your wisdom to leave politics to politicians and be solely the artist.”

There remains but little more to report. Young Morse proved himself again a true prophet, for in a letter of December 22, 1814, he says:

“With respect to peace, I can only say I should not be surprised if the preliminaries were signed before January.”

The treaty of Ghent was signed on December 24, 1814, but not announced until February, 1815. The war was now at an end, and Morse returned to America a few months afterward; but in a letter of March 21, 1815, after describing Napoleon Bonaparte’s return from Elba, he has this final word to say:

“The character we have acquired among the nations of Europe in our late contest with England has placed us on such high ground that none of them, England least of all, will wish to embroil themselves with us.”

EDWARD L. MORSE.